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Myths in the Russian Collective Memory: The 'Golden era' of Pre-Revolutionary Russia and the "Disaster of 1917."

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Abstract

This paper examines shared ideas, values and interpretations of the past in the "collective memory" of the 1917 October Revolution. Employing a qualitative approach to examine collective memory "from below," two age cohorts were interviewed in three Russian cities from a variety of social groups in 2014–2015. What was revealed was the existence of a strong positive myth about the pre-revolutionary era of 1900–1914, as well as positive references to the current Putin era. Both eras were "positive" in that Russia was/is a "normal European power," "on the rise economically" and "respected by the other powers." In terms of the definitive national trauma, an overwhelming majority viewed the 1917 October Revolution as a break or rupture in Russian history that caused appalling destruction. This view of 1917 as catastrophic leads to certain key "lessons": that revolutionary change is inherently destructive and wasteful and that external forces had (and have) a vested interest in weakening Russia from without whenever she is at her most vulnerable. Overall, at the heart of myths over 1917 we find a central occupation with the threat of disintegration and a yearning for stability and normality, highlighting how collective memory interacts with political values and social identity.

Key Words: Collective memory, myths, historical memory policy, national identity, golden ages, national victimhood

0. Introduction

With the centenary of the October Revolution, many have noticed the marked ambiguity and caution shown toward it by the Russian authorities, something that stands in stark contrast to the way victory in the Second World War has been commemorated in recent times. Given the abhorrence the Russian leadership regularly displays towards "colour revolutions," a reluctance to mark the centenary of a violent coup d'état with any real fanfare is unsurprising. It would also appear politically inexpedient for Moscow to follow policies resembling the general de-Sovietization effort in Ukraine, which has included the removal of Lenin statues. Meanwhile, census polling reveals a mixed picture; as many as 51% view Lenin's role in Russian history positively, and only 14% would support the removal of his statues.[1] On the other hand, 60% of Russians would like to have Lenin buried, although this is not necessarily an indicator of attitudes to the legacy of

[1] https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/19/vladimir-lenin/

Lenin or the October revolution.[2] What is lacking in this polling is an articulation of what kind of narratives are in circulation about October 1917. This paper provides thick descriptions that suggest a popular shift in attitudes towards the 1917 revolution has already occurred in Russia. Below we examine the ideas, values and interpretations people have in common on a "shared history," revealing what myths, in Ernst Renan's terms, are "remembered" and "forgotten" in the "collective memory." Two mutually reinforcing myths are found to be in operation about 1917. Firstly, that the pre-war period (1900–1914) was a period of stability, security and economic growth, when Russia was on a path to "normality." The second is the widespread view of October 1917 as a disastrous rupture in Russia's development and a catastrophe for the people of Russia, a position that represents a reversal of the old foundational myth of October propagated in Soviet times.

After a consideration of the theoretical and methodological questions behind studying collective memory, this paper examines the how these myths support certain values in Russia today, which are connected to a common yearning for "normality" and "stability", as well as strong leadership. Alongside this, we find a certain degree of victimhood and conspiracy in representations of how Russia was undermined in 1917 by external forces. In viewing "the West" as fundamentally (and historically) interested in weakening and even dismembering Russia, this offers an insight into how conspiracy motives are employed by ordinary people as a "populist theory of power." (Fenster 2008, 84–90). In examining the most commonly reproduced myths in collective memory we also reveal the social frames behind this transmission; images of Russia as a victim of "unfair" history, and the obsession with stability, reflect the anxieties of social groups and may be linked to memories of state disintegration and dislocation.

1.0 Popular collective memory and the role of myths

The pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs remains of central importance for those studying collective memory. He argued that "no memory is possible outside the frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections." (Halbwachs 1992, 43). Thus, Halbwachs links the successful transmission of collective memory to "social frames"; it is up to the social group to decide what is remembered and forgotten from history. This is achieved, in part at least, through discussions in families and communities; transmission through larger social groups is only possible if a given memory is congruent with

[2] The polls were conducted in April 2016 by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM). https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115661. It should be noted that VCIOM have been accused of pro-Kremlin bias and falsifying polls. https://republic.ru/russia/lev_gudkov_nas_zakroyut-943322.xhtml and http://www.mk.ru/politics/2017/06/29/glava-vcioma-sredi-rossiyan-primerno-15-derma.html.

dominant thoughts, values and feelings. While we may be indebted to Halbwachs for coining and developing the term, employing "collective memory" as a blanket term is problematic; it is helpful to break this concept down. Nets-Zehngut (2012, 254–255) suggested dividing "collective memory" into five constituent components,[3] the last of which, the "popular" collective memory, is the focus of this paper. "Popular" memory, then, can be understood as those predominant representations of the past that are successfully reproduced and transmitted in social groups. When we consider the content of what is being reproduced and transmitted, we find much of collective memory being packaged in "myth" (Smith 1997; Bell 2003; Jubulis 2007; de Salla 2010; Bottici and Challand 2015). In the view of Bell (2003), a "myth" is a story that "simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation's past and its place in the world … through (re)constructing its past." (Bell 2003, 75). Here we do not understand "myth" as synonym for "lie" or "falsehood"; instead it is better to conceive of it a narrative that possesses an "emotional underpinning" and is able to "add significance to the world." (Bottici and Challand 2015, 90–92). Thus, we can view a myth as a form of "collectively remembered history" that is transmitted successfully across groups (Assman 2008, 68).

What makes these myths important is their role in connecting a "suitable past" with a "believable future." (Misztal 2003, 17). The remembering of a desirable past often involves locating a "golden age" or "heroic past"; those periods when the country was in more desirable circumstances. Conversely, this can also be achieved in reference to the negative past; those periods when the country faced hardship, injustice or "disaster." As Bell (2003) noted, a variety of myths battle it out for prominence; they behave as different and competing "discursive formations" (Foucalt 1978, 15). Popular collective memory is fluid and changing; it is possible for the fringe ideas of the few (counter-memory) to displace hegemonic views of the past. Thus, memory is a "contested territory in which groups engaging in a political conflict promote competitive views of the past in order to gain control over the political centre" (Zerubavel 1997, 11). Myths about the past act as "a cultural programme that orientates our intentions, sets our moods, and enables us to act" (Schwartz 1996, 921). The past is "framed" in terms of the present; myths must be congruent with contemporary cultural values and standards and, thus, inhabit a common space with the experience of the present. An example of how myth can set agendas in the present can be found in the work of Subotić on Croatian and Serbian hegemonic narratives that both focus on "broadly shared feelings of victimhood, even martyrdom, and injustice at the hands of more powerful states, and a desire for the vindication of past wrongs." (Subotić 2013,

[3] The other four are 'the official' (organized by various state bodies from textbooks in schools to museum exhibitions), 'the autobiographical' (events and experience as recorded in memoirs and oral history), 'the historical' (arranged by professional scholars and historians) and the 'cultural' (which emerges in films, TV, books, media, documentaries (Nets-Zehngut 2012:254-255).

325). Thus, examining the myths of popular memory can reveal much about how versions of the nation's past inform and reinforce a variety of ideas about the political and social world.

1.1 Methodology

In mapping the "popular" collective memory, many researchers make use of public opinion polling data, where choices are arranged in advance by researchers, and respondents are expected to tick boxes and provide a picture of how history is perceived (Levada 2006; Gorškov et al 2011; White, S. 2010; Schuman, H. and Scott, J. 1989). While quantitative surveys are a vital part of the picture, it is always worth asking what content in terms of narrative, imagery and myth lie behind these selections. In this paper, polling data provides important numerical data, while my own semi-structured interviews offer what Geertz (1973) termed "thick descriptions". These allow us to explore what is 'remembered' and 'forgotten' in collective memory and gain access to the meanings that people give to events and periods. Ethnographic fieldwork also gives respondents more agency in choosing what periods to discuss; it is hoped that when a certain number of diverse people reproduce the same myth in similar ways, we can be confident we have unearthed something of interest in the collective memory.

The data for this paper were collected in over eighty semi-structured interviews in Russian three cities, Nizhny Novgorod, Moscow and St. Petersburg, from May 2014 to September 2015. Respondents were selected to offer as representative a cross-section of social background, education and occupation as possible. Interviews were between one hour to ninety minutes in length and sought to probe four different aspects of the 'imagined nation', one of which concerned historical memory of Russian history from 1900 to the present. All respondents were encouraged to skip questions they felt had no relevance to them. Respondents were asked to select a period that constituted a particularly "positive" and "negative" period for Russia and give reasons for this selection. This was followed by a discussion of perestroika and the end of the USSR and, finally, what might be the key lesson of Russia's twentieth century.

2.0 Upward and downward trajectories: The golden ages of 1900–1914 and 2000–2014, the great rupture of 1917

When we consider the selection of "positive periods", the central finding in this research was a strong preference for non-Soviet periods. Over half the respondents selected either period leading up to the First

World War (1900–1914) or the Putin era (2000–2014).[4] Respondents of varying ages, occupation and class selected these two periods, thus suggesting these myths are being transmitted across social groups.[5] This finding is supported by the results of large-scale polling in Russia on the pre-revolutionary period.[6] This research, however, revealed how positive representations of the 1900–1914 period were framed; respondents were consistent in describing this as a time when Russia was on the correct path in terms of her development. What is interesting is that many respondents saw this as a path to "normality" in terms of being like other powerful European states. The Russia of this time was described as one of the Great Powers of the age, her role in the world was important; she was a strong country respected and admired by other European countries. The respondent below underlines how these traits are unlike the Russia of today: "Pre-revolutionary Russia, for example, was a very strong country […] We lived better than (the rest of) Europe. I mean Europe came to us: doctor, tutors to work in Russian families. […] but now we see the opposite picture, when people are looking for ways to leave here." (Natalya (50), Accountant. NN).

Several respondents focused on the economic potential of Russia in this period. This included references to the powerful status of the Russian Rouble, which was "placed on the gold standard, making it one of the most important and dependable currencies in the world." (Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN). Another part of economic dynamism was connected to Stolypin's agricultural reforms, and Russia's role as the world's largest grain exporter: "Russia, even if she was agrarian, was not a wild or ignorant country. Back then we everything was in order in term of grain production, we had trade fairs [...] I mean Russia was developing." (Eliza (60) Director of Sports Centre, SPB). Thus, we are presented with the common idea of growing prosperity and development, that the country was "on the ascendancy" (*vzlët*), when "everything was on the up." (*vsë šlo vverch*) (Misha (29), Actor, Moscow). This narrative of upward stable trajectory and being a normal European country, is central to one key myth of 1900–1914; the idea that, if not for the various misfortunes to befall the empire, everything would have worked out differently: "It would have been better if the Revolution hadn't happened but we had had evolution, like in the West." (Eliza (60) Director of Sports Centre, SPB). The damage that the October Revolution did was to shatter Russia's "normal" progress in terms of historical, social, political, cultural and economic development. Thus, the 1917 disaster is often understood as a "rupture" from a

[4] Around a third of respondents chose Soviet periods, but these were divided between the Stalinist industrialization phase, the post-war era 1945–65 and the Brezhnev era (1965–1982). These groups were largely older and from lower socio-economic groups. Another small segment of varying ages holding more 'liberal' values selected Perestroika and the nineties.

[5] This is in contrast to those who chose Stalinist Industrialization as the positive period, a segment that was largely over the age of forty and came from working-class families in the USSR. Thus, the myth about Stalinist industrialization is limited to a socio-generational group, while the myth on 1900–1914 seems to more easily be transmitted and reproduced across class and age lines.

[6] A 2016 Levada Center poll showed 30% viewed the pre-revolutionary period of Nicholas II positively as opposed to only 19% viewing it negatively: https://www.levada.ru/2016/03/01/praviteli-v-otechestvennoj-istorii/. A 2011 study also showed the popularity of 1900–1914 across two generational groups (18–30 age cohort 83%, 31–50 age cohort 82%) (Gorškov et al 2011: 76).

"normal" pathway: "The worst period, in my view, was the October Revolution. This was the biggest evil because it if wasn't for this we would have just had our normal February revolution. We would have developed like all normal European countries. We would have taken that path because we were on it already." (Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB).

It is interesting that descriptions of 1900–1914 as a successful period resonate with narratives about the Putin era (2000–2014).[7] The popularity of the Putin period vis-à-vis other periods of Russia's modern history was also recently established in 2017 polling.[8] In this context we find the qualities of the Stolypin and the Putin eras being presented in similar terms, independently.[9] This involved a common focus on modest but steady economic improvement and confidence in the country's development. Many younger respondents also highlighted the Putin period as one where Russians experienced increased prosperity, progress and security resulting from economic growth, bringing improved living standards across the board. As the respondent below notes of the first decade of Putin's administration, the sense of upward trajectory in living standards without any great upheavals is clear and resonates with previous descriptions of the Stolypin era's gradual improvements:

"This was a decade (2000–2010), when the people of Russia had never lived better, I mean for the whole of our history, the first time […] we reached a new level of consumerism […] Russia has never eaten so well. And all the while Putin has never demanded much. Never asked people to die to build factories, never asked us to die in the name of capitalism! We have some state money, and it is spread around to smooth out the rough edges." (Konstantin (27), , state municipal management specialist, Moscow).

According to one respondent, the key commonalities between these two "most auspicious periods" in Russian history were that in both cases "Russia in one way or another took a jump forward and started to rise to the same level of other European countries (…) (this was about) a leap forward (skačok), progress, a strong ruler." (Nastya (21) Economics Student, NN). Putin era stability is framed in terms of the ruin that *preceded* it (the "wild nineties"), while the 1900–1914 period is contrasted to the chaos that *followed* it (the October revolution and civil war) (Ludmilla, (50) Head of University Dormitory, NN). Much of this ties in with what was once a

[7] Although 2000–2014 is difficult to view as a 'historical period', respondents were given the freedom to pick any era between today and 1900, and the selection of the Putin period reveals much about the values people attach to stability, economic growth and relative calm.
[8] Interestingly, Levada polling for 1993–94 on this question show around 20% selecting the 1900–1914 period, which came in second only to the Brezhnev era (40%). When the new poll was launched in 2017 it added a new (ahistorical) category 'the Putin era'. This shot to first place (32%) and pulled support away from the other two popular periods, which now scored lower (6% and 29% respectively). As the scores are not broken down into age groups it makes it hard to analyse these dynamics along the age cohorts studied in this research. http://www.levada.ru/2017/02/14/fevralskaya-revolyutsiya-1917/
[9] Only a handful of respondents explicitly connected the two periods. However, the content of the descriptions, when placed alongside one another, do strongly resonate

"counter-hegemonic" position at the end of the 1980's: the idea that, had Russia avoided the "disaster" of 1917, she would have continued on a path of modernization and remained one of the "civilized nations."[10] Popular memory is clearly tied to cultural memory that emerges through books, media, TV and films. Future research into these connections would do much to expand our understanding of how popular memory evolves over a longer period of time.

2.1 The Rupture of 1917

The idea of 1917 as "the darkest page" in Russia's history turned out to be very commonly reproduced: the October Revolution and the Civil War that followed it was chosen by the largest proportion of respondents (around half) as the worst period in Russia's history since 1900.[11] Sociological polling has also confirmed this picture in part.[12] What these numbers do not tell us, however, what kind of narratives exist on this period. It is of note that, in discussing this period, very few respondents made any reference to the figure of V. I. Lenin, making it difficult to assess his place in Russia's collective memory.[13] Instead, this "dark" and "abnormal" age for Russia was described in other rich and diverse ways, suggesting the powerful potential it has accumulated in popular collective memory. Representations of the "disaster" focused on three interlinking lines, (i) as a human tragedy (ii) as a catastrophe for the Russian nation (iii) as a geopolitical disaster for the Russian state (and a relief to Russia's rivals).

In the first sense, the barbaric human cost of the revolution, which was often summarized with reference to the brutal execution of the royal family, an act that typified the blind, ruthless violence of the era and showed wilful destruction as inherent to the revolution's progression: "As a humanist, just how they (the Bolsheviks) behaved with the family of the Tsar, I think that was unjust and simply inhuman. It was awful and it summed up the nature of the new authorities. Also for the people it was supposed to give them an idea of what these new rulers were really made of." (Marina (25), Language teacher, NN).

[10] This mythical idealization of the Stolypin era may find its origins in Alexander Solženitsyn's three volume 'The Red Wheel' (1990), followed by the 1992 film 'The Russia we lost' by Sergei Govoruchin

[11] In second place was Collectivization (a third of respondents), followed by the Market reforms under Yeltsin (one fifth of respondents)

[12] A Levada poll found the October Revolution and the period following it is viewed negatively by 48%, with only 19% holding a positive view: https://www.levada.ru/2016/03/01/praviteli-v-otechestvennoj-istorii/. A Russian Academy of Science study in 2011 found 62% of the 18–30 age cohort and 55% of the 31–50 age cohort selected it as a negative period (Gorškov et al 2011: 78). These results should not be confused with polling on 'the role of the October Revolution in Russian history', which has been steadily divided over the years (it currently stands at 48% positive and 31% negative https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/05/oktyabrskaya-revolyutsiya-2/). The difference may be that in the first case respondents are considering a period (October 1917 until NEP), where as in the second they reflect on the Revolution's longer legacy across history, which is a far more complex question.

[13] Levada Center polling shows interesting results on the figure of Lenin, who seems to retain some credibility on the mass level. (https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/19/vladimir-lenin/). It is likely that broader assessments of Lenin the leader and October 1917 as an event in history are more mixed and still fit with some Soviet-era representations. On the other hand, the period of 1917–1923 is subject to demonization as a "tragedy for the nation".

In the second line, we find the tragic human losses are considered more on the level of the nation as a whole. This includes, for example, not only individual tragedies but collective loss, such as cultural destruction wrought by the Bolsheviks on "lifestyles, a feel for language, and the ability to sing our Russian songs […] Every people has the experience of previous generations, the collective subconscious and, sadly, what we had built up, we lost here" (Misha (29), Actor, Moscow). This imagines 1917–23 as a period where the Russia "nation", understood as her culture, intelligentsia, religion, and traditions, was under assault. This entails viewing the October Revolution as the start of a process that wiped out some of the best minds in Russia at the time. The essence of this idea is that the "best elements" of the country were removed and replaced with "lesser" types: "Thinking people, engineers, the educated, doctors, writers.. qualified specialists […] people who could have made a contribution to the development of the country […] well, after the revolution a large part of them either left or were exterminated." (Ruslan (57) Programmer, SPB).

An interesting term that cropped up in several younger and older respondents (especially in the SPB respondents) was that the "best of the nation" (*ves' cvet nacii)* was exterminated during this era of catastrophe, leaving lower cultural elements to come to the fore.[14] In other words, 1917 was a tragedy because "The best of the nation (*ves' cvet nacii*) was either killed or, having survived, left the country. Now they live in America, France or Germany. All that was left behind were the drunken sailors that had carried out the revolution." (Alexei (25) Assistant to deputy of Local Assembly, SPB). The 'disaster' of 1917–23 was often described in the most the most emotive terms, and is an excellent example of how myth operates in popular collective memory. Firstly, the period in question (the Revolution and Civil War) is simplified and painted in terms of "trauma" – a tragedy in terms of what it did to the Russian people. Secondly, meaning is injected into the narrative through emotion. Here the emotion is one of great lament, the feeling of victimhood. In using the term "we", the trauma is imagined to have hurt the Russian nation that, in the case below, is comprised of the royal family, the Church, classes of people. All of the latter are imagined to be victims; the essence of the tragedy is the damage done to the fabric of the "nation":

"The worst was October 1917. We Russian people, desecrated everything sacred that we had. You can say 'we' or 'they' but in fact we were and are one people. And we shot our royal family, a house that had served

[14] This discourse was already well-developed in the late eighties. The phrase '*cvet nacii*' can be found as early as 1992 in the words of Social Democratic politician Boris Orlov who, in an interview, railed against the role of the Bolshevik party in Russia's history. http://www.yeltsincenter.ru/digest/release/den-za-dnem-7-fevralya-1992-goda.

the state for centuries faithfully and truthfully. It was not just a sin, it was a fatal error. We started totally destroying our own religion, wrecking our churches and killing our priests. We killed entire classes of people! The best of our nation (*ves' cvet nacii*) was killed or left the country. It was like a knockout blow that nobody can get up from." (Alexander (25), Business development manager, SPB).

The third main way of discussing the tragedy of 1917 was to view it as a geopolitical catastrophe for the Russian state, wiping out years of successful Romanov statecraft with the deleterious effects it had on Russia as a state (*gosudarstvo)* and a world power (*deržava*). Sociological polling suggests this line of thinking has retained a stable share of popular thinking on 1917, with around a quarter of respondents viewing the collapse of the monarchy as "leading to a loss of national and state greatness."[15] This line of thinking views Russia's trials and tribulations through the prism of competition with external powers and often interprets October 1917 as a betrayal linked to Western intrigues. Here the revolutionaries are seen as traitors to Russia; by forcing her out of the war the country lost her rightful place at the table of victors:

"I consider the collapse of the Russian Empire to be an act of treason. I mean (pause) imagine it, while the war is raging a person arrives, Lenin from Germany, who passed in train through the country, he arrives and brings down the country.. I mean the socialists brought down our army and, in the end, Russia leaves a war she could have won." (Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN).

This brings us to one of the "lessons" of 1917: that Russia lacked strong leadership in this period, "At this moment we didn't have enough smart people in the state, those who could have done something and taken control of these processes, applying some political will and a certain amount of harshness (*žestokost'*) in order to bring the situation under control." (Igor, (41) Lecturer in International Relations, NN). Thus, the weakness caused by this indecisive leadership, combined with the arrival of various treacherous and terroristic revolutionaries, allowed internal upheaval and disorder to cause treachery and the defeat of Russia's interests. Sociological polling comparing mass views to the revolution between 1990 and 2017 suggests there is a increase in those viewing it the loss of the Autocracy as a "great loss", and in those explaining the revolution as a result of "weak central government" (from 36% to 45%) and "a conspiracy against the Russian people" (from 6% to 20%).[16] This research also uncovered similar proportions; it is to this minority of respondents, who rely on conspiracy themes in explaining Russia's past trajectory, that we will now turn.

[15] https://www.levada.ru/2017/02/14/fevralskaya-revolyutsiya-1917/
[16] https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/05/oktyabrskaya-revolyutsiya-2/

2.2 Conspiracy themes and the longue durée view of Russian history

One segment of respondents, who were largely male and aged over forty, claimed that the October Revolution was a conspiracy fostered abroad in Western Europe and unleashed on Russia when she was at her most vulnerable. The most elaborate form of this conspiracy theory was that foreign powers wished to dismember the Russian empire and rather remarkably use Leon Trockij and the Bolsheviks as their agents to plunder Russia's resources.[17] While this conspiracy theory was rarely reproduced in its full form, some ideas inherent to it were; namely that foreign powers welcomed the revolution as heralding the fall of the Russian empire:, "when the revolution happened all of Russia's enemies (*nedrugi*) were delighted – 'finally Russia is falling apart and we will get our fingers in the pie too!'" (Oleg (49) Construction site supervisor, SPB).

Respondents with this view of 1917 also tended to have the same attitude toward the 1991 collapse of the USSR, which they explained it in terms of a hostile and duplicitous West, as well as the treacherous activities of Gorbačëv. They argued the 1991 break-up of the USSR was "arranged from without" while "certain forces inside the country that facilitated this." Afterwards, however, ordinary people "did not benefit from the collapse of the USSR." (Vitaly (42), semi-retired. NN). It is possible that the popularity of these conspiracy motifs is connected to personal experience of "loss" suffered in the post-collapse environment. As was noted in the ethnographic work of Oushakine (2009, 74), "The inability to convincingly explain individual or collective losses has resulted in an intensive production of popular conspiracy narratives aimed to bring light to hidden forces and concealed plans of 'evil outsiders.'" What is important to examine here, is whether these narratives of "collapse engineered from without" are successfully transmitted to younger respondents. While the scope of this research does not allow a conclusive answer to this, a significant minority of younger respondents did reproduce conspiracy narratives. In doing this they tended to refer to a *longue durée* view Russian history that emphasises dramatic upward and downward trajectories over the centuries. These are partially tied to the interventions and subversive acts of the Western powers who, concerned by Russia's potential might, conspire to place obstacles in her path and, when possible, bring about her downfall:

"They say the USSR was brought down on purpose in order to destroy stability in Russia. They say Russia was a potentially very strong power and if everything started to work here then basically she could become a very strong and good country. We have great potential. The fact is that revolutions and crises have destroyed Russia periodically at precisely the times that she had been able to get on her two feet […] only for her to be

[17] During elite interviews in Moscow, I came into contact with members of the Anti-Maidan organisation who reproduced these ideas in detail to me. (https://antimaidan.ru). One of their more prominent leaders, Nicolai Starikov, has written a number of works outlining this view of 1917. See bibliography for details.

forced back into improper (*nepriličnie*) positions, all so that she won't get too powerful. After all, it is easier to stop something in the early stages than let it grow to its potential. We all know the world is run by people from the West."(Daria (28), Events Manager for Local Government, SPB).

This long view tends to view Russian history as a struggle between two extreme states: stable, ordered periods characterized by strong central rule and phases of disorder, chaos, internal upheaval, often referred to in Russian as *smuta.* Respondents offered the pre-war era (1900–1914) and the Brezhnev era (*zastoj*) (1964–1982) as classic stable phases, while contrasting them with the October Revolution and Civil War (1917–1923) and the perestroika/market reforms of the nineties (1989–1999). This cycle is graphically illustrated in the following way: "History goes in like a spiral in Russia, people never learn. We always have to end up with the shit hitting the fan (*v polnoj žope*) and then, only then, do things pick up. Our country doesn't know how to develop in a gradual way." (Pieter (29) Manager in export company, SPB).

The acceptance of this cyclical long-view interpretation of Russian history is linked to three very important "lessons from history" that help support current values and ideas. The first of these equates "revolution" with any rash and overly hasty policies or sudden social and political change. According to his view, "the path of revolution is totally unacceptable", political change "shouldn't be done through the great leaps and killing (*skakanija i gibeli*) of people." Furthermore, revolutions are led by "a handful of people" who "stupefy" the masses. Finally, the masses themselves "just stupidly follow" these leaders even though they "don't really get the point" and are ultimately the ones who "suffer" the consequences (Olga, (50) Head of University Dormitory, NN). Below, Russia's twentieth century traumas are listed, explaining the desire for "peace" and "quiet". This viewpoint presents Russia as a country lurching from one radical set of events to the next with barely a respite between. This represents a kind of yearning for the kind of "normality" respondents described with regards 1900–1914 and 2000–2014: that of stability, order and peace:

"They accuse us Russians of some kind of passivity. Like we aren't capable of decisive action. But we Russians are tired of war, revolution. For the last one hundred years, through the civil war, revolution, then the Stalinist repressions, the war with fascism, where many millions of people lost their lives, every family had deaths. Then there was Afghanistan; I had classmates fighting there. And remember the zinc-lined coffins that came back from there. We are tired of all this, just let us have a peaceful life. I don't want lots of impulsive actions (*aktivnych dejstviy*). Let the politicians agree among themselves somehow, we just don't want any demonstrations, we've had enough. We don't want any wars." (Natalya (50), Accountant. NN).

This kind of sentiment above shows how life experience (Afghanistan and political demonstrations) ties in with understanding of history to create values in the present.[18] This idea was condensed down into a more transmittable form and was a common position for respondents young and old. The essence of this mass common-sense position is that "you shouldn't try to change life through revolution" as this will "destabilise life completely." Thus, reform "needs to be done gradually, not to destroy and then build from nothing." (Katya (22) Politics Student, NN). A logical extension of this is the second key lesson: Russia only prospers when she has a "strong leader" at the helm. This connects "strong leaders" with "stability" and "weak leaders" with "chaos." Thus, one consequence of this *longue durée* view of Russian history, is support for political leaderships that are powerful, decisive and tough: a point that chimes well with the image projected by the current President:

"Russia only starts to get back on her feet (*podnimat'sja*) and start living more or less well when she has a powerful leader (*moščnyj lider*). Take Gorbačëv, he was neither here nor there and the country fell apart. […] But take Stalin, Putin, Lenin… well, let's just say the Russian people on a genetic level behave themselves well only when they are under the leadership of a tough Tsar (*žëstkogo džarja*). If the Tsar is not tough a collapse will happen." (Anton (52) ex-officer army officer, small business owner, SPB).

This brings us to the third important lesson of Russian history: the idea that the West was and is central to explaining Russia's troubles, then and now. Such perceptions of the West are far from a fringe phenomenon; a common thread among respondents was to see America (or, alternatively, a global capitalist elite) as an acquisitive force that seeks to divide the world up and devour its resources. It is here that the ideas of conspiracy spill over into mainstream discourse on how to interpret Russia in the world: "Russia has 2% of the world's population […] but she controls 15% of the territory and 15% of the world's resources. And some think that is unfair. They want to control this space. The Colour Revolutions in the East, what are they in aid of? Just to get control of the oil." (Grigory (49) Computer programming. NN). In the extract below, Putin is positioned as a force for good protecting Russia's position in an inequitable global structure:

"A global system exists for the distribution of resources. If we look at economics, Russia's role is to extract oil, this then is exported to Europe. The money Russia receives for this must be put in American banks and financial funds. Then America gives loans and credit to Russia. But in this way the Americans have our money

[18] It is also a sentiment that can be traced as far back as 1992, when the leader of the communist party Gennady Zyuganov announced Russia had "reached its limit for revolutions". http://tr.rkrp-rpk.ru/get.php?2076

and finance us with our own money! But Putin is putting a stop to this system. Maybe he has become a dictator but he has stopped all this." (Anatoly (55), History lecturer, NN).

It is not just that the "lower levels" of society who are adopting conspiracy themes in seeing the world; those at the very top appear to endorse an understanding of geopolitics that points to the meddling hand of an imperialist Washington at every step. As can be seen in the words of Russia's foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the political leadership in Russia has made it clear they see regime change as a goal of the Western powers and, given this urgent abnormal situation, special measures are needed to serve Russia's "all or nothing" struggle with the West for sovereignty:

"We can see how the United States and its Western alliance try to retain their dominant position by any methods. All kinds of pressure are used to this end from economic sanctions to direct armed interventions; large-scale information warfare tactics are employed; unconstitutional regime change techniques involving 'colour revolutions' are perfected. But such 'democratic' revolutions bring devastation to the target countries. Russia, which also went through a period when it encouraged artificial transformations abroad, now firmly believes in the preference of evolutionary change which should be made in such a form and at such a speed that would match the traditions of respective societies and their levels of development." (Sergei Lavrov, 2016).[19]

It is ultimately challenging to determine what is more important; the pre-existing sentiment that exists "from below" that is reproduced among people, or the work done by prominent figures, among intellectuals, the media and the state to craft these narratives "from above." Suffice to say, this is a two-way synthesis; actors "from above" must be in tune with sentiment "from below" to successfully propagate certain ideas. In any case, the tendency to link fear of the internal upheaval and disorder (*smuta)* with the view that powerful external forces seek Russia's downfall is observable in popular memory. Understandings of the past are important to how contemporary world politics is imagined. If "Russia can only be destroyed from within" and "the external enemy, whether it is Napoleon, Hitler, the Poles" failed because the country was united against them, then it is logical to seek unity today against the West, which uses revolutions as a means to control the world, with the most obvious example of this being found in the Middle East, which is "up in flames." (Pieter (29) Manager in export company, SPB). The above illustrates well the sense that conspiracy theories "purport to

[19] Sergei Lavrov (March 2016) http://www.globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/Istoricheskaya-perspektiva-vneshnei-politiki-Rossii-18017

uncover complex relations and pathways, they are by definition simplifying stories—impositions of linearity and causality on a complex social world." (Ortmann and Heathershaw 2012,553) It can be concluded that conspiratorial themes about history seem to play an important role in drawing out the lessons of 1917, especially with regards Russia's internal stability and global position.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed how, in many ways, myths about the past are connected to the understanding of the present, which is influenced by social identity and the social frames in transmitting memory. The successful transmission of the positive myth on 1900–1914 (and 2000–2014) reflects how this is congruent with key values in Russia today, such as the desire for stability and normality, as well as a phobia of upheaval and disintegration, which are seen as the greatest obstacles in Russia's planned trajectory towards becoming a "normal" country. The period emerging from October 1917 acts as a logical counterpoint to this; it is an "abnormal" period in the country's past. What makes the negative myth of 1917 so powerful is the range of emotional power it contains; the stories of immediate human tragedy, the long-term damage to the nation, the sense of loss in terms of cultural, economic and political power. More work could be done to tie the salience of these positive and negative myths to sources found in culture: TV, films, books and media. The myths discussed in this paper also exist across state media, the Internet and in grassroots sentiment. Identifying where myths are reproduced and consumed would shed more light on how popular historical memory takes its course.

Another aspect of collective memory here is the salience of victimhood; the Russian people have suffered greatly due to a series of catastrophes, of which 1917 is only one. The search for an answer to the question "why have we suffered so?" is, for many, found in the machinations of foreign powers in Russia's internal affairs. We should not marginalize such thinking as "conspiracy theories"; this type of thinking is a mechanism in social identity construction, it sets up an opposition between a putative "us" (the Russian people) versus a shadowy "other". A *longue durée* version of Russian history was discovered that presents the country's past as a series of promising upward trajectories interrupted by spirals of chaos and destruction. At the very least there is a significant minority in Russia that accepts the three "lessons" of 1917 that are partially reproduced by state actors: (a) Russia must avoid internal upheaval at all cost (b) Russia must be ruled by a strong hand (c) external forces seek Russia's dissolution and must be resisted. This *longue durée* view buttresses the *status quo* today, encouraging loyalty to the state lest a repeat of the 1917 (or 1991)

tragedy occur today. Overall, we find ample evidence that myths about the past interact with and reinforce values in the present. The myths of popular memory are very much living entities and inform and reinforce certain important views of the political and social world. Further work needs to be done to develop the picture further, linking the transmitted myths and pictures of a desirable past in the popular memory with the trends and developments in cultural memory, as well as the efforts of official memory "from above."

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